

What if a Bird Sings and No One Hears It?

by Sam Hamilton

Birds are a national treasure, one shared with neighboring countries well beyond our own continent. Nearly 1,000 different kinds of wild birds call the United States their home at some part of the year. Sadly, 74 of those species are considered endangered or threatened, and nearly 150 have been named "Birds of Conservation Concern" due to their small distribution, declining populations, or the high threats they face.

There are short-term conservation advances to celebrate as the *State of the Birds* report for the United States demonstrates that strategic land protection and management can and has reversed declines of certain bird groups such as ducks and geese. Thanks to the environmental movement spurred by Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, devastating chemicals like DDT were banned allowing bird songs to continue ushering in the promise of spring.

Now we are dealing with a new, more insidious problem that is threatening public support for successful bird conservation programs. While new generations of birds still sing, younger generations of Americans may not stop to listen or even care.

Our planet is home to the most technologically connected generation in the history of the world, yet they are increasingly disconnected from the rhythms of nature. They are connected to the Internet, text messages, and 300 TV and cable channels, but disengaged from the natural rhythms of the world around them. Growing up not on farms, but coming of age in exurbs, suburbs, and cities, our youngest Americans are attuned to modern distractions unimaginable a generation ago.

Today, diversions are inescapable and overwhelming. Devices like iPods and iPhones allow us to access sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace, keeping us glued to technology and precluding our gaze out the window, down the stream, or across a meadow to appreciate and better understand the natural world.

But as evidenced by their turnout in the last national election, this highly-connected generation can rally together and move in one direction with speed and efficiency. Culturally relevant and economically powerful, this group of 18- to 30-year-olds has a proven ability to influence national movements and affect the direction of our nation in a profound way. If this generation can become more aware of and concerned with loss of birds, other wildlife, and their habitats, perhaps literal mountains may not be moved, but large swaths of critical native landscapes could be saved and properly managed.

The benefits to both wild birds and connected people would truly be something to tweet and Twitter about.

Sam Hamilton is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast Regional Director and based in Atlanta.